

Yarrow, December 31, 2009

Ps 90:1,8

Hy 1A

Hy 16:1,2,3,4

Ps 8:1,4

Hy 56:1,2,3,4

John 1:14-18

Exodus 33:12-23; 34:29-35

2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6

John 1:14b "We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Much has happened this past year that has demanded much of our thought and energy. The year began with the collapse of the market and the uncertainty that followed in relation to work and financial security. In the months since we heard much of H1N1, for which we received advice from this side and that as to how we ought to respond. Of late the big talk has been climate change, and the scare that comes with that. To lesser or greater degree, each of these factors has touched our lives in some way. Closer to home we've contended this past year with sicknesses in our families, with death, with disobedience and straying from God, even with silent tears as we faced tension in the home. These things too absorbed so much of our mental and emotional energy.

Then yes, we're very aware that 2009 had so very many blessings. We're exceedingly grateful that our world still knows peace, that there is sufficient work for the vast majority of us, that we have the general good health that we have. We're very grateful for blessings in our families, blessings of new life, blessings of growth in faith, blessings of happiness in marriage, and so much more. Our God is good and gracious indeed. Still, truth be said, it's the struggles and the brokenness and the frustrations that demand so much of our energy, and as we look back on the year now drawing to a close, those are the things that jump to mind. Exactly because it's the struggles that jump into focus, it's equally the struggles we tend to think of first as we look into the new year before us. And that can make the new year a bit daunting....

It turns out, brothers and sisters, that these cares (and these joys) are so many distractions tearing our eyes away from where they ought to be focused. For our God has *His* characterization of the year now passing, and we do well to evaluate the year from His perspective. That will help us too to approach the New Year with the right frame of mind.

His perspective? Our God would have us know that in 2009 God displayed His glory on this earth again. And He'll do so also in 2010.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

YEAR IN YEAR OUT PEOPLE MAY SEE GOD'S GLORY ON EARTH.

1. Who sees the glory?
2. What's the glory people see?
3. How does the glory encourage us?

1. Who sees the glory?

With the first part of chap 1:14 –we recall it from Christmas Day– the apostle John had taken us to the manger of Bethlehem and bade us behold the child wrapped in swaddling clothes. Though the child looked like any other child, John drew our attention to the mystery in the manger. This child, said John, was "the Word", God Himself, become "flesh", become a creature vulnerable to the effects

of the fall into sin. The marvel of Bethlehem was the greater, we learned, because Christmas was more than a momentary flash-in-the-pan; the Word-become-flesh “tabernacled among us”. The very God who had come to His people in the tabernacle at Mt Sinai, who had deserted His temple in the days of the exile, had now returned – to live not in a tabernacle or temple built with hands, but to live instead in “flesh”. Here was a marvel beyond both expectation and comprehension, but the gospel of it was clear: God Himself had come to man!

By the providence of God, the inspired evangelist John did not stop his comments concerning Christmas with telling us what *God* did, telling us that “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” John attaches to his account of what God did a report of what *people* did. That’s the second part of the verse, our text for today. “We,” he writes, “have seen His glory.”

‘We’: the reference is, of course, to John himself, together with those with him. John, we need to know, was one of Jesus’ disciples who spent three years following the Teacher, listening to Him, watching Him and all His works – as John himself relates in his gospel. John and those with him witnessed Jesus’ suffering and death, could testify too of His resurrection from the dead. John and those with him witnessed Jesus’ ascension into heaven, and beheld the marvels of the Spirit’s outpouring on Pentecost. They saw the work of the ascended Christ as He gathered His church as it’s related in the book of Acts. What John and those with Him have *not* seen is the manger of Bethlehem itself; they were not yet on the scene at the time of Jesus’ birth. Though the first half of vs 14 – “the Word became flesh” – sends our thoughts to Christmas, the second half – “we have seen His glory” – sends our thoughts to the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry and His continuing ministry on earth after His ascension into heaven. Concerning this ministry of the Saviour John writes that herein was displayed “the glory of the One and only”.

And here, brothers and sisters, is again a marvel most wonderful. For this glory is displayed *on earth*, is displayed *in the presence of sinners*. That’s the answer to our first question this evening. Who sees the glory – why, *that’s sinners*, people like you and me, weak people, *flesh*, those whom God has exiled from His presence in the Garden! Such people have seen with their own eyes the glory of God; how amazing!

But there’s more. The testimony of these witnesses needs *our* attention, for the term John uses for ‘see’ catches a particular kind of seeing. It’s not a passing glance but a concentrated look, the sort of ‘seeing’ that happens when you’re *impressed* by what you see and so stop to look again. It’s a careful look, one that soaks in the details and is absolutely sure of what you see. And so it’s worth talking about, and worth the listeners’ time to hear about it. That brings us to our second point:

2. *What’s the glory sinners saw?*

John says: “we have seen His *glory*.” The word ‘glory’ has a particular loading that we need to understand well.¹ Of *people* the word translated for us as ‘glory’ describes the notion that the person is *important*, has *standing* in the opinion of general society. So Joseph in Egypt, for example, told his brothers that they must tell father Jacob “of all my glory” (or ‘honour’, as the NIV has it, Gen 45:13). Of *God*, however, the term captures “that which makes God impressive to man.”² The notion of ‘glory’ conveys His *Godness*. God *reveals* Himself, lets people see something of Who He is, and that’s *glorious, overwhelming, impressive*; people respond by *standing in awe*.

Sometimes God uses nature to demonstrate something of His glory. Psalm 19: “the heavens declare the glory of God” (vs 1). Psalm 29 adds that the God of glory causes thunder to sound from His throne, and the result is that “in His temple everyone says ‘Glory!’” (vss 3,9).

¹ For what follows, see C Trimp, “De Heerlijkheid van God”, in *De Reformatie*, Vol 54, nos 7-11. See also *TDNT re doxa*, II, 233ff.

² *TDNT*, pg 238.

At other times God privileged His covenant people Israel by letting them see His glory with their own eyes. Think of what happened at Mt Sinai. According to Exodus 24, “the glory of the Lord rested on Mt Sinai” (vs 16). Can you imagine: “the sight of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel” (vs 17). Those sinners of so many generations ago *saw with their own eyes* something of the overwhelming majesty of God Himself! No wonder they reacted with fear and trembling (Ex 19).

Once the tabernacle was completed, “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle,” filled it so that Moses could not enter (Ex 40:34f) – and the people could see this glory with their own eyes. At the dedication of Solomon’s temple, “the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (I Kings 8:11) – with as result that the priests could not continue their labours in the temple as long as the glory of the Lord was present (see also II Chron 5:14). Ezekiel too was permitted in a vision to see the glory of the Lord, first departing from the temple of Jerusalem and then returning to the new temple God was pleased to build (Ezek 8-11; 43:1ff;44:4). In all these examples Mighty God was pleased to concentrate His majestic identity at the place where He was pleased to meet His people so that His children-by-covenant *could see* His glory. His very **God**-ness was so evident in the display of glory, a God-ness so impressive that people had to keep their distance from the glory. To see that glory was an awe-inspiring experience, it pointed up on the one hand the radical *difference* between this wonderful God and the insignificant creature man with whom He’d sovereignly made His covenant, and pointed up on the other hand the fact that this God was nevertheless pleased to be *near* to sinful man. It’s not without significance, then, that these manifestations of God’s glory occurred in the context of the tabernacle or temple with its altar of forgiveness of sins.

Again, the **God**-ness of God as displayed in the appearance of God’s glory was pointed up the more when the people gave themselves to sin. When the people of Israel in the desert grumbled about lack of food, ‘the glory of the Lord’ appeared to the people – and Moses’ standing as mediator between this God and His sinful people was emphasised in the minds of the people (Ex 16:10). After the twelve spies returned from the Promised Land with their ill report, and the people thought to stone Moses and Aaron, “the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle before all the children of Israel” (Num 14:10) – and the people dared not cast stones any longer at the mediator God appointed between Himself and His people. When Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, “the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation” (Num 16:19,42) – and Moses and Aaron, mediators as they were in the relation between this majestic God and His sinful people, were vindicated. It needs to be fixed in our minds: in order to impress upon His people that His law was not a football to be kicked around, God Himself came to compel obedience through revealing His glory! He came with His impressive majesty, came to overawe, to electrify, to show sinful upstarts what place God demanded for Himself in their midst.

The marvel of such a God dwelling with a sinful people was laid before the Israelites every time God spoke to them through Moses. When Moses came down from the mountain after the covenant renewal, “the skin of his face shone” (Ex 34:30). The people understood: this man’s face reflected something of the *God*-ness of their covenant Lord. It became a pattern: whenever Moses went in to speak with the Lord in the tent of meeting and to hear what God wanted him to tell the people, his face was radiant – and the people were reminded of the glory of their covenant God, the God who came to dwell among them. Similarly, when the people came to God in the tabernacle with their sacrifices, they could know that they did not come to God in vain; around His throne in the Holy of Holies were His heavenly servants, the angels – described in Scripture as “cherubim of *glory*” (Hebrews 9:5). God’s imposing presence, the glory of the Lord, was the guarantee that God’s covenant with Israel was real; holy God, God Most High, was really and truly *present* with His sinful people. How merciful, then, was the gospel of the glory of the Lord! God in the midst of men – Immanuel!

We hear all this, and we say, Yes, well, so what.... That's all from long ago; we live today. But notice then, congregation, that in all those references to the Old Testament God's glory came..., *and went again!* The glory was apparent at the dedication of the tabernacle, but the next day it was gone. The glory was apparent when Solomon's temple was first put to use, but the next day it was gone. The glory of God disappears from the pages of Scripture.... Similarly, we read that Moses' face shone as a result of his meeting with God in the tent of meeting, so that after Moses finished speaking with God, he put a veil on his face –why?– because, says Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, because the glory on his face kept fading away (vs 13). We realize why. Sin remained a reality, and so the distance between holy God and fallen man could not be fully bridged....

But precisely this reality, congregation, makes John's testimony in our text so rich! John has written about the incarnation of Jesus Christ – Christmas. "The Word became flesh," said he, "and made His dwelling among us." John didn't meet up with Jesus till at least thirty years later, and now John describes the blessed effect of Christmas; "we have seen His glory!" Numerous times in the Old Testament God had shown His glory to men, and every manifestation of that glory was impressive, awe-inspiring; sinful men could see something of God's glory, and be impressed. *Now John says of Him who once lay in that manger: here is revealed God's glory!* What the saints of the Old Testament saw in the brightness above Mt Sinai, what the Israelites saw at the dedication of the tabernacle, was manifested also in the Man of Bethlehem! No, the naked eye might not see such glory here as the saints of old had seen. As a baby He was like any other. As a teenager He was like any other. Even as an adult He was like any other; He was known simply as Joseph's and Mary's son. But never mind what the naked eye sees; John was moved by the Holy Spirit to record who Jesus really was: in Him was revealed the glory of the Lord! God in His *God-ness*, God making an impression on people, God demonstrating Who He really was!

John tells us more about the identity of this glory. The glory of this Jesus is, as it were, "the glory of the One and Only" – or, as other translations render it (quite correctly) the "only-begotten of the Father." In the Old Testament, the presence of God's glory was evidence that God Himself was there. John signals a difference here. Yes, this is the glory of the Lord; in Jesus Christ God is present in His splendour. Yet it's different, for this is the glory of the *only begotten* of the Father. Here is the same identity and the same contrast as in vs 1 of John's first chapter: "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word was God, and yet not identical to God. That's more than the human mind can comprehend, for this is the riddle of the Trinity – you recall it from last week. Vs 14 contains the same tension, for the glory John beheld is the glory of God and yet it's not the glory of God; this is "glory as of the only begotten of the Father." No, my mind cannot comprehend it.

But exactly that, beloved, points up the weightiness, the awesomeness of God as He shows it to people! John says that he beheld God's glory in the Word-become-flesh. Yet his human eye could never have seen more than a common child, an average teenager, a normal man. But never mind; John still declares for his readers what he saw: "we have seen His glory." *And John did not perish in this display of divine glory!* Though God's own Son was present among people, those who saw Him lived to tell the story. No wonder John must add that the glory he saw was "full of grace and truth". God with sinners and the sinners don't perish; how marvellous, how wonderful!

But the bigger wonder, beloved, is this: in the Old Testament the glory of the Lord came..., and went.... But it was not so here! In Jesus Christ God was present with people and remained present! The apostle John lists in the remainder of chap 1 so many evidences of Jesus' divinity; God in our midst. He's Yahweh Himself (vs 23), He's the Lamb God sent for sin (vs 29), He's the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament (vs 41), He's the Son of God and the King of Israel (vs 49), and He's even the Son of Man of Daniel 7 that forms the staircase linking heaven and earth (vs 51). John moves on in chap 2 to recount how Jesus multiplied wine at the wedding in Cana, and John adds that Jesus

“thus revealed His glory” (vs 11). You see: Jesus’ entire public ministry involved a constant display of heavenly glory; He was God-on-earth!

But what shall we say of the cross of Calvary? Would anyone dare to say that His glory was manifested as He hung on that cursed cross, with all its overwhelming pain and shame?! Surely, beloved, there was no glory of God manifested on the cross! In Jesus Christ also the glory of God came..., and went....

Read, then, my beloved, the word of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 3! The apostle vividly *contrasts* the glory of the Old Testament with the glory of the New. The apostle is insistent that the Old Testament ministry “was glorious”, so glorious “that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance,” though that “glory was passing away”. But then he adds concerning the New Testament dispensation this rhetorical question: “will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?” (2 Corinthians 3:7f). O yes: the glory of God in Bethlehem has come and gone, was born and died. But the Word who became flesh arose from the dead, then ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God almighty – He received again the glory which He had with the Father before the world was made (cf John 17:5). This same Christ poured out His Holy Spirit on all those chosen to life. In the Spirit the *glory* of God is shown again to man, the Spirit makes an impression upon sinful man, makes such an impression that sinful men are *changed*, renewed, converted so that *sinner's image God!* Says the apostle in that same passage from 2 Corinthians 3 (and he speaks concerning himself and the saints of Corinth!): “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (vs 18).

You see, beloved: the glory of the Lord has not at all disappeared; that glory is localized now in the saints, in those washed by the blood of Christ and renewed by His Spirit! The glory of the Lord has not come *and gone*; the glory has come *and stayed!* Not only has the Lord come to tabernacle in His own so that today the people of God are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19); the gospel is so very much richer still! The glory of the Lord, that which shows what God is, that which *makes an impression* so that people stand in awe, remains on earth still, yes, is now localized in the saints of Corinth, in the saints of Yarrow, in God’s covenant people of all times and places! Increasingly, says the apostle, we “are being transformed...from glory to glory.” By the decree of sovereign God, sinners may behold the glory of God by observing the children of God. In the *saints* the glory of God is manifested still! It is as Jesus reported to God in His high-priestly prayer in John 17: “...the glory which You gave Me I have given them” (vs 22), and with the word ‘them’ Jesus means the believers, the saints, the redeemed, *you and me*.

And lest we still get it wrong, the Lord moved Paul to write to the Romans like this: “...whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (8:30). Make no mistake, beloved: Paul considers it to be an established fact that the elect are already glorified. That is: the glory of the Lord has settled upon the elect; the elect possess the glory of God, reflect the glory of God.

Here, beloved, is a richness beyond all comprehension! That the glory of God appeared from time to time among God’s sinful covenant people of the old dispensation was a wealth surpassing understanding. How much richer is the new dispensation, now that the glory of God is with us permanently (cf 2 Corinthians 3:9ff)! Yes, how much richer are we allowed to be, that *we may be* the glory of God!

Yet even that isn’t the end of the matter. For the apostle adds in 2 Corinthians 4 that the New Testament preaching (to which Jesus’ Holy Spirit equips men) radiates a greater glory than was reflected by the face of Moses. The preaching of the New Testament era radiates a greater glory because it shows to us the face of God as He has shown it in His only Son. The radiance of Moses’ face

faded away, but the radiance of the preaching does not fade away. For the gospel preached in the New Testament era is “the glory of Christ” (vs 4).

That leaves the last point:

3. How does the glory encourage us?

Why, congregation, that’s so simple! For such splendour must fill your head, your thoughts, your heart!! We’re at the end of another year, a year in which we’ve demonstrated to our shame just how sinful we are. There’s been so much brokenness, so much evidence that we’re flesh and that the bitter effects of our fall into sin continue to press upon us. *Yet God has not deserted us!* On the contrary, we have seen the glory of God in the year gone by, more, we even reflect the glory of God! Here’s the gospel in all its wealth, full of grace and truth for sinners as we are. God has been at work this past year, at work in our midst, and He’s caused us to see His glory in the Word that was preached to us, more, has caused us to grow in Him through the Word so that we reflect His glory in increasing measure. Where else do you think the fruits of the Spirit come from that are so evident in the congregation? Your God shows His glory in your life and mine, and it’s a glory that others around us can actually see! That they don’t see it is, says Paul, their own fault, for the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so that they cannot see the glory of the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4). But you can see it, and receive great encouragement from God’s mighty work in your midst.

What shall we focus on then as we look back on 2009? Shall we focus on the struggles and the brokenness and tears that took up so much of our time and energy this past year? But that, beloved, is to distract us from what was really exciting in 2009, and that was that the Word-become-flesh has continued to have His Word –and so His glory– proclaimed in our midst, His church be gathered, and so sinners permitted to see something of His **God**-ness. That’s where the focus needs to be, for that was the marvel of 2009.

And that’s equally what shall be the marvel of 2010. The development of world history will continue in 2010 under the wise government of our ascended Lord, and we shall see much more of sin and unbelief in God’s fallen world. But we’ll not get discouraged by what we see in the world, for in God’s church we see the wonderful evidence of the Saviour’s continuing glory. So we enter the new year full of confidence and optimism; the Saviour’s glory shall continue to abound in us more and more, for He is faithful.